

9 Rules for Writing Philosophy

Rule 1. Don't leave me in suspense.

At the start of your essay, state your *thesis* – i.e. the answer to the question you'll be arguing for. At every point in your essay, make clear how what you're saying contributes to your argument. Then at the end, conclude by reminding the reader what you've argued for.

Sometimes, you won't know what you think about a question, which makes it tricky to pick a thesis. That's normal! Philosophy is difficult, and no one expects you to have a settled view. It helps to remember that, for the purposes of your essay, it doesn't matter what you think. It matters what you can provide an argument for. That's your thesis.

Rule 2. Make one point per paragraph.

Each paragraph should do one thing for you. Generally, a paragraph should outline a view, explain an objection, or reply to an objection. If your paragraph is doing more than one of these things, split it up. If it is not doing any of these things, it might be fluff (see Rule 6).

Rule 3. Anything worth saying is worth explaining.

Explain everything. Your essay should be clear enough that someone with no background in philosophy could understand it. That means you should explain any technical terminology or difficult ideas. This is partly about being kind to the reader: it's not enjoyable to read things that are obscure. But you should also do this for more self-interested reasons. When it comes to assessment, your job is to convince the examiner that you know what you're talking about. The best way to convince them of that is to explain what you mean.

Note that *italics* are not a substitute for explaining what you mean.

Rule 4. Keep it simple.

Never use a long word where a short one will do. Never use a fancy word where a common one will do. Never use a long sentence where two shorter ones will do. If you need to use the same word twice, use it twice – there's no need for a proliferation of synonyms.

Rule 5. If you're setting out an argument (P₁, P₂ ... etc), make it manifestly valid.

For instance, if you want to show that some animals are badgers, don't write the following:

P₁: David is a brock.

C: So, some animals are badgers.

This leaves implicit both that David is an animal, and that a brock is a badger. So, for all this says, the premise could be true and the conclusion false. To make this manifestly valid, you'd need to add P₂: David is an animal, and P₃: All brocks are badgers. In general, make all of your premises explicit, and use the same terminology throughout.

Note that you should try to do this even if the argument you're setting out is not *yours* – e.g. if it's an argument to which you're going to reply. Of course, sometimes you'll want to reply to an argument by showing that it's *not* valid, at which point making it manifestly valid won't be possible. But you should still set it out as clearly, explicitly and charitably (see Rule 8) as you can.

Rule 6. No fluff!

'Fluff' means rhetorical flourishes that don't contribute to your argument. Fluff includes, but is not limited to:

- irrelevant historical context
- metaphors/figurative language
- parenthetical remarks/asides
- rhetorical questions

Rule 7. Don't make stronger claims than you need.

Suppose you're trying to show that some animals are badgers. To establish this, you just need to show that at least one animal is a badger. From that, you can conclude that some animals are badgers. You don't need to make a stronger claim – such as that all the animals in your garden are badgers. In fact, you *shouldn't* make a stronger claim. Suppose we argue as follows:

Argument 1: P₁: There are some animals in my garden, all of which are badgers.
C: So, some animals are badgers.

Argument 1 is valid. But someone might reply:

Argument 2: P₂: Jeff is an animal in your garden, and Jeff is a hedgehog.
P₃: No hedgehogs are badgers.
C: So, not all the animals in your garden are badgers.

Argument 2 looks like a good objection to P₁. And since P₁ is Argument 1's only premise, it undermines Argument 1. But of course, we didn't need to make a claim as strong as P₁ in order to show that some animals are badgers! As long as one animal is a badger, Jeff's being a hedgehog is a red herring. In offering Argument 1, we opened ourselves up to Argument 2, which is an unhelpful distraction. You can avoid this sort of thing by not making stronger claims than you need.

Rule 8. Be charitable.

Give your opponent the benefit of the doubt. You should aim to give the most *charitable* interpretation of their view before you raise objections to it. If it seems like they've said something silly, ask yourself what might motivate somebody to think that – or whether they really mean what you think they mean. If it looks like their argument is invalid, consider whether they're relying on an implicit premise (see Rule 5). If they make a comment you disagree with, does their argument work without that claim, or with a weaker one you do agree with (see Rule 7)? If so, say so.

Rule 9. Formalism isn't always helpful.

Formal logic is a wonderful, powerful thing. It can help you work out whether an argument is valid. It can show that two arguments share the same formal structure. It can shed light on the ways in which natural language sentences are ambiguous. But if you're simply setting out an argument, it is often not helpful to translate it into formal language. Doing so makes its abstract structure clear at the cost of stripping it of meaning. It effectively gives the reader an extra job: translating the argument back into a language they understand. Wherever possible, *you* should take on the hard work of making arguments clear in natural language.